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Feature - Article

## Large-scale land acquisitions in the 'Global South': creating evidence on a global level

*In 2010 a partnership of interested organisations under the lead of the International Land Coalition set out for a campaign to collect data on international Large-Scale Land Acquisitions. The objective is to contribute to more transparency and information for policy, advocacy and research. The collected reports on land deal amount to a total demand of up to 80 Mio ha covering 1.7% of the world's total agricultural area. This confirms that international land acquisitions are a driver of land transformation at global level. More importantly, the analysis of emerging patterns shows that land concerned is highly concentrated in a few countries, most of them in Africa. Competition for land with local land users is often unavoidable as land being acquired is not idle. Land governance systems are often inadequate to deal with the challenge. So far, there is little evidence of tangible benefits for local populations available.*

The International Land Coalition (ILC), in a partnership with CDE, University of Bern (Switzerland), CIRAD (France), GIGA (Germany), and GIZ (Germany), collected data on large-scale land acquisitions with the aim of revealing the global dimensions as well as the emerging patterns of the phenomenon. This was done by reviewing publically available media and research reports, company websites and accessing direct information through the partnership network. Cross-referencing of the data was done where possible, and each deal was assigned a reliability code. A database containing information on over 2000 land deals was established and a report providing an analysis of the data has been launched in April 2012 (Anseeuw et al, 2012a).

A preliminary data base has been set-up where part of the data is publically displayed for review <http://landportal.info/landmatrix>. The efforts of this crowd-sourcing campaign confirm that data is highly controversial, and often difficult to confirm. The public display of data proved to be effective in getting numerous feedbacks. In the meantime, the

database is undergoing an up-date, which involves correcting erroneous data, adding new deals and review of the comments on the beta-version. In the future, failed deals and contract farming will be documented also, but under separate category.

The analyses of cross-referenced data revealed that the rush for land is real and represents neither a media hype nor a short term reaction to the food price spikes in 2008/2009 (see also Anseeuw et al, 2012b). In total, reports on interest for land acquisitions – lease, concession or sale – were reported for an area amounting to a total of more than 80 Mio ha. Implementation activities have started at about one fourth of the land surfaces reported, and one third of the reported deals have so far actually led to signed contracts. But our data also shows that many transactions may not yet be known, other deals were actually never signed. However, a first descriptive analysis of the information that also made links to national statistics and a number of global spatial data sets allowed revealing a number of emerging patterns (Anseeuw et al, 2012a):

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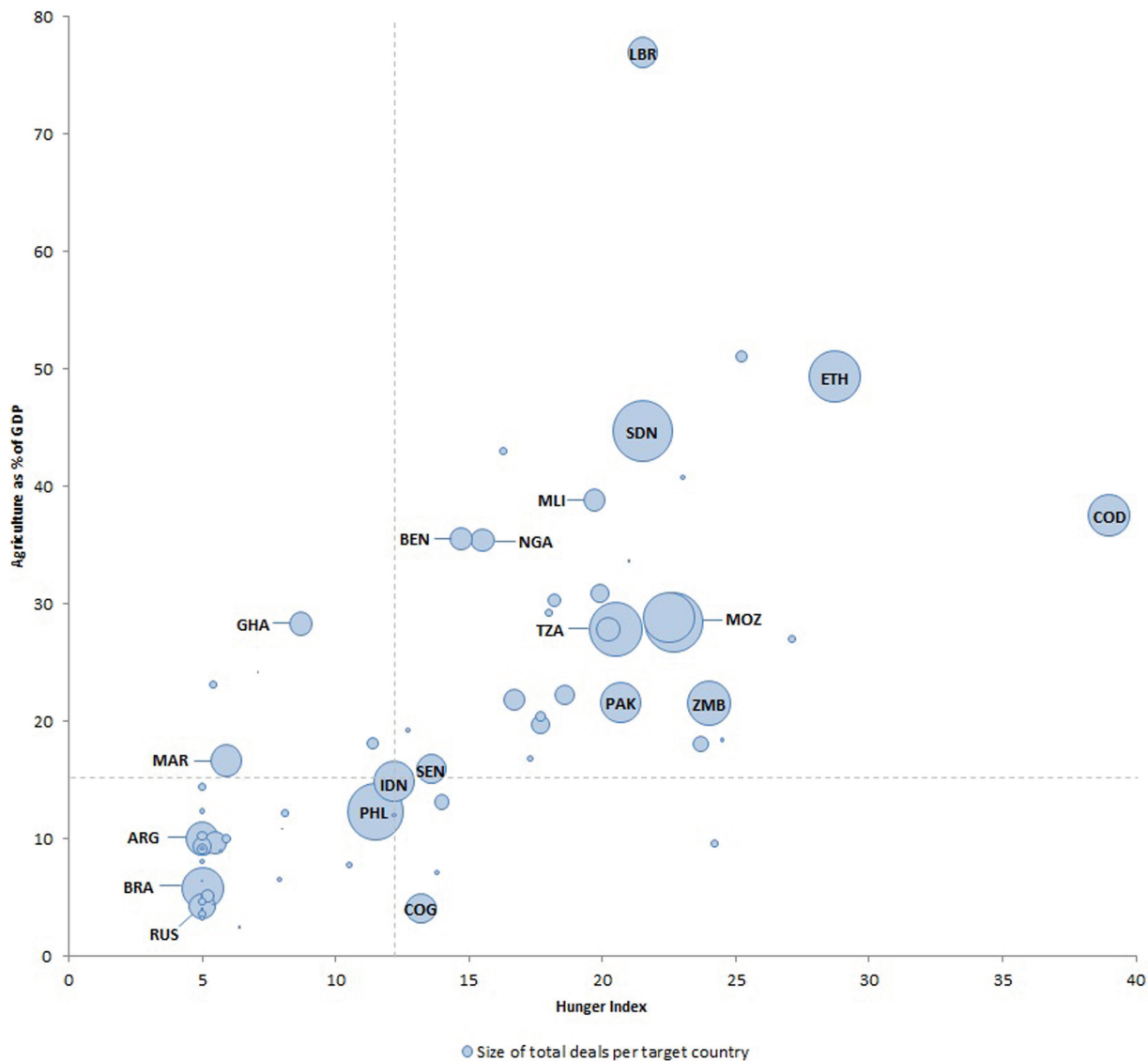
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- Transnational land acquisitions are highly concentrated in Africa. Worldwide 11 countries account for 70% of the reported land deal surfaces, and 7 of those countries are found in Africa. Many of the countries concerned are also affected by a high incidence of hunger and have economies that are highly dependent on agriculture (figure 1).
- The database also identifies three categories of investor countries, i.e. emerging countries, the Gulf States and the Global North. We also observe a trend to new regionalism such as in South East Asia or Southern Africa, where investors come from within the region (China, Vietnam, South Africa).
- Only about one third of the project is focusing purely on food-production, and the vast majority of projects is for exports. Investors are seeking flexibility to switch between non-food and food production, especially by using crops such as sugarcane, soya and oil palm.
- Investors are competing for land with local farming communities. Approximately 45% of the land deals target cropland or crop-vegetation mosaics. Intensive competition for cropland with local communities is therefore a probability. Even where national indicators may suggest large reserves of suitable land, target locations are often found within cultivated areas and farmland. This analysis thus contradicts the notion that investments are mostly focused on "idle" land and serve to bring it into production.
- Forested areas are highly affected by land acquisitions. About 24% of the land deals are located in forested areas.
- Land governance systems are not often adequate to deal with large-scale land investments. The involvement of foreign investors has repercussions on the local land tenure system.
- It is common that the prospect of attracting foreign investment may alter the significance and role of formal land rights that are often held by state. The analysis of a limited number of projects where such information was available showed that Governments are in fact often selling or leasing land where smallholders have customary user rights.
- Our research also showed that acquisitions are rarely based on Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC) and there is limited but worrying evidence on evictions. The evidence from the Land Matrix reveals that only very few projects seem to engage in adequate consultations with local communities. Rates of compensations are often very low, and where those are foreseen they are often still statements of intent.

The project faces obviously a number of challenges. From the side of the object of research, information on land deals is often not disclosed and not readily available. Also the term international acquisitions is not easily defined, and international and domestic investors act in partnerships and through complicated legal constructs – tracking the origin of the investment can prove difficult. Contract farming, another important trend in investment in agriculture, falls technically outside the definition of land acquisition but can also be confused or linked to land deals. Lastly, land deals evolve over time, starting possibly by the announcement, and going on to publishing of a contract, start of investment and finally to production. Hence the need for a differentiated reporting system arises.

On the methodological side, the scope of the research question is global. It is consequently necessary to have a methodology which does not aim at complete coverage but at getting representative data. However a data campaign based on partner networks is subject to many biases, such as uneven strength of partners' network, language barriers, uneven government policies on transparency, as well as difference in access to communication and other factors.

Currently the land matrix partnership aims at overcoming some of the aforementioned challenges by aggregating the numerous available case studies at a global level, by improving this data through crowd-sourcing techniques and produce analytical results at the global level on a regular basis. On the other hand we also aim at producing more detailed analysis of impacts of land acquisitions through a number of projects in target countries. An explicit aim is to better understand the land acquisitions and their impacts by a more detailed look at the context in which these investments take place. Lastly, we also aim at contributing towards informed-decision making and support to policy in view of minimizing risks of LSLA and enhancing possible benefits.



**Figure 1:** Typology of land acquisitions according to Global Hunger Index 2011 and agricultural GDP.

**Note:** The size of the bubble represents the share of the total acquired land for each target country.

**Source:** Anseeuw, W. et al. 2012 (based on data from IFPRI 2011 and World Bank 2008).

## References

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